Senator Schumer Has Put Israel in Danger

03/21/2024

Commentary on Israeli politics by a leading US senator may inadvertently embolden Iran and its proxies, threatening Israel's defense capabilities

With his inappropriate call for Israelis to elect a new prime minister now, during a war, US Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer has put Israel in danger. That's because it's not all about Gaza. A horrible conflict with Lebanon is looming on the horizon, and he has brought it closer.

The main problem with Schumer's speech is not its content but how it's perceived. In this post-fact world of attention spans like a gnat's, perception is reality.

How many laypeople either heard or read Schumer's entire speech? Anybody? Or do they leave it to us analysts, who make a practice of reading everything we can get our hands on—like that 2009 interview with a top Palestinian negotiator who disclosed Israel's offer of a state, the one the Associated Press banned me from writing about—but I digress.

Schumer's 6,000-word speech is well-balanced, expressing views that many, possibly most, Israelis could live with. Besides calling for replacing Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu through elections, he declares that extremists like cabinet ministers Bezalel Smotrich and Itamar Ben Gvir should not be in positions of leadership. Schumer also advocates deposing Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, not necessarily through elections. He criticizes Abbas for the Palestinian Authority's encouragement of terrorism and failure to improve the lives of its people. He blames Hamas, not Israel, for the current conflict and the humanitarian crisis it has caused, and he insists that Hamas and its supporters must not be a part of Palestinian leadership. He concludes that the only sustainable, peaceful permanent arrangement is a two-state solution—a demilitarized Palestinian state next to Israel.

If an Israeli had written that, it would have received little notice because all those points are decidedly mainstream here. **The problem is that it came from the top US senator**—a proud, pro-Israel Jew at that— and **the reporting singled out only his call for elections to replace Netanyahu**, who, Schumer says, has "lost his way" and puts his political survival above the welfare of the nation. All his other points got lost, because in this **era of anti-social media**, **information overload, and superficial headline-glancing**—one point is what most people see, no more. Therefore, that's what the politicians respond to. So enemies of the US and Israel perceive Schumer's speech as **another crack in the foundation of one of the most durable alliances** in modern history, one that has benefited both sides almost beyond measure.

Perception is reality. It's not just theory; it has practical effects here. Israel is engaged in another smoldering war that you don't hear much about because of all the attention to Gaza.

Since Oct. 7, when Hamas sent thousands of bloodthirsty terrorists across Israel's border with Gaza to kill, maim, burn, and rape more than 1,000 Israelis and kidnap more than 200 others, **Hizbullah** [*] has joined the battle from Lebanon. In the last five months, Hizbullah has fired more than 3,000 rockets across Israel's northern border, forcing the evacuation of 96,000 Israelis from 28 northern villages. These Israelis have been living in hotels and guest houses and crashing with relatives for nearly half a year, as Hizbullah pounds their empty homes with rocket after rocket after rocket. Israel's military responds with airstrikes against Hizbullah bases and terrorists and the like, mostly in Lebanon but also in Syria—though **there is no illusion that such pinpoint strikes can stop the rocket fire**. Hizbullah is said to have more than 100,000 rockets, some of them longer-range guided missiles, aimed at all parts of Israel. Is there a nation in the world that would put up with this kind of destruction and threat for five months without an all-out response? Of course not. **So what's holding Israel back**?

The main factors are the hope that Hizbullah will stop its attacks when the Gaza war is over, and the reluctance to trigger a full-scale war with Lebanon that would include massive bombardments of Israeli cities with powerful rockets.

(*) Formed in 1982 in response to the Israeli invasion of Lebanon, Hizballah (the "Party of God"), a Lebanon-based Shia terrorist group, advocates Shia empowerment globally.